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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5914  
INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS IMMEDIATE 4329  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE 3233  
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT IMMEDIATE 3428  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS IMMEDIATE 4542  
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS IMMEDIATE 9215  
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA IMMEDIATE 2710

C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 000355

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, DRL FOR COFSKY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2011

TAGS: PHUM PGOV MO

SUBJECT: CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY -- A PROBLEM?

REF: A. 05 RABAT 00958  
¶B. 05 RABAT 00991

Classified By: Political Counselor Craig Karp, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Morocco's Christian population is primarily expatriates; however, in the last few months, newspaper reports indicate that there is a growing number of local converts to Christianity. While the converts seem to lead "double" lives -- Muslim in public, Christian in private, they may be increasing. The governmental and religious framework declares Islam as the state religion. The Government of Morocco (GOM) has not widely enforced laws against conversion. Enforcement, however, cannot be ruled out should Christian conversion become a political issue whipped up by Islamic extremists or others against the GOM or the king. End Summary.

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Religion in Morocco -- The Framework  
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¶12. (C) The preamble to the Moroccan constitution says Morocco is "an Islamic and fully sovereign state whose official language is Arabic." Article 6 states: "Islam shall be the state religion. The state shall guarantee freedom of worship for all." The king is identified as the "Commander of the Faithful" in Article 19 because of the Alaouite dynasty's claim that it descends from Mohammed. Some commentators have interpreted "Commander of the Faithful" to apply to Moroccan Jews, as people of the book, which would also cover Christians. Morocco continues fully to respect the rights of its Jewish citizens. Respect towards resident Christians is also generally true. Both Catholic and non-Catholic churches, including Orthodox churches, are prominently located in Moroccan cities and appear to operate normally in general.

¶13. (SBU) According to the penal code, article 220, any attempt to stop one or more persons from the exercise of their religious beliefs or from attendance at religious services is unlawful and may be punished by 3 to 6 months imprisonment and a fine of 115 to 575 dirhams (USD 10 to 60). The article applies the same penalty to "anyone who employs incitements to shake the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion."

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Spreading Christianity  
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¶4. (SBU) There is only one confirmed case in 2006 of a non-Moroccan attempting to convert Moroccan Muslims to Christianity. In November, a German citizen of Egyptian (Coptic) origin, Sadek Noshi Yassa, was convicted of proselytizing in Agadir. In accordance with the penal code, he was sentenced to six months in prison and a 500 dirhams (USD 60) fine for distributing Bibles, other books and CDs about Christianity. Yassa did not serve the sentence; he paid the fine, and left the country. Unlike in 2005 (reftel A, B), the press made little of this case.

¶5. (U) In December, an AFP account reported that there are fifty independent Protestant evangelical churches in the larger Moroccan cities with a membership of one thousand Moroccans who have converted from Islam to Christianity. These Moroccan converts engage actively in proselytizing and, according to the article, the number of converts is increasing. The converts gather in groups no larger than twenty; and, once there are more than twenty members, the group splits in two. (Note: These churches are not affiliated with any international Protestant church and are similar to the "house churches" of early Christianity. End Note.) The churches in major Moroccan cities are identified as being only for the expatriate Christian community by the Muslim Moroccan converts. Converts remain officially Muslim in order to continue with their lives, according to the article. Christianity is understood by these converts as "a religion of tolerance and love," whereas Islam is perceived as "a social straitjacket and not as a real faith," as reported in the article.

¶6. (U) In January, Al Alam, the Arabic language newspaper affiliated with the Istiqlal party, published an article about the "evangelization campaign" occurring in Morocco. The article paid particular attention to an increasing number of local dialect Arabic language Internet sites devoted to converting Muslims to Christianity and stated that "evangelists" are freely "wandering" the country. The article called for the criminal code to be applied to the evangelists, pointing out that the Istiqlal political party has already brought the problem to the Government of Morocco's (GOM) attention. Saying that the constitutional foundation of Morocco and the country's values are being impugned, the article called for GOM action.

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) The Moroccan constitution states clearly the country's Islamic identity and the penal code further elucidates this position. Such provisions are not unknown in other predominantly Muslim countries. These provisions are grounded in Chapter 9:11-12 of the Qu'ran which discusses apostates, those who convert to another religion. The verses are: "But even so, if they repent, establish regular prayers, and practice regular charity, they are your brethren in Faith: thus do we explain the signs in detail, for those who understand. But, if they violate their oaths after their covenant, and taunt you for your faith, fight you the chiefs of unfaith, for their oaths are nothing to them." The "hadiths," the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, say that anyone who abandons Islam may be killed.

¶8. (C) In Morocco, a Muslim must remain a Muslim both because of his faith and because of his government. There is an increasing prospect, however, for extremist Muslims to use conversion and/or proselytizing as a way to convince the population that the "West" is against them; or, for violent action against Christians to be justified.

¶9. (C) There is no way to validate whether or not the local Christian community is increasing -- we are unaware of any statistics. It is not surprising that Moroccan converts would be extremely reluctant to advertise widely. The GOM has not so far intervened. It might, however, eventually

feel obliged to do so, should the presence of a local Christian population become a political issue, exploited by extremists and others to discredit the GOM, and, by extension, the king.

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